

The Right Write Site

The fourth grader inquired, "Did you post a new question today?" as she accompanied the backpack brigade into the classroom. She and her "bookmates" were reading *Incident at Hawk's Hill* and were participating in an online discussion about the novel. Their teacher, Teena Staller, regularly posts focus questions on her personalized Write Site provided as a free service by the Southern Oregon Education Service District (ESD) in Medford.

In addition to using the seven computers in Teena's classroom, students can work elsewhere—at school, a friend's, the public library, or at home. And they're not alone; several parents are reading along and occasionally contribute to the online discussion, modeling collaborative learning beyond the school walls—all thanks to the Internet.

The Southern Oregon Write Site (SOWS) project did not originate as an online discussion forum but as support for the writing process. What the Internet adds to the writing curriculum is the freedom for students to read and respond to their classmates' writing. With response performed online, no longer is the "Four copies

of assignment five are due Monday at the beginning of class" scenario necessary for peer-review activities—saving time, paper, and money. It is this feedback that students consider when revising their drafts; creating a piece that often more closely reflects the lesson's scoring criteria and is more suitable for

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Southern Oregon Write Site

To POST some writing

- Visit the [Lesson Index](#).
- Navigate to the Lesson you're working on.
- Select the stage of your assignment: draft, revision, etc.
- Enter your ID which is how your writing is sorted. The ID may be assigned or could be as simple as some digits of your phone number or address.
- Enter the assignment title (e.g. *welcome1*) with
- Type (or paste from) your revision in the text box.
- Click the "Submit"

To READ some writing

- After you've submitted your writing you may view it by visiting the "Anthology (A Collection of Writing)" available for each lesson. Go first to the [Lesson Index](#) and then click on the "Lesson" you wish to view.
- There are links to the Anthology for drafts, revisions, and final copies.
- When you arrive at the Anthology, click on your browser's "Refresh/Reload" button to update your screen with the latest submissions since your last visit.
- To view a piece listed in the Anthology (A Collection of Writing), click on the a blue title.
- When you submit a revision, change the title with a version number (for example, *food1* will become *food2*).

By Nick Viani

Subject: Writing, peer review

Audience: Teachers, technology coordinators, library media specialists, teacher educators

Grade Level: 4–12 (Ages 9–18)

Technology: Internet/Web, FileMaker, e-mail

Standards: NETS•S 3; NETS•T II (<http://www.iste.org/standards>). ELA 5–6 (<http://www.ncte.org/standards/standards.shtml>).

Supplement: <http://www.iste.org/LL/>

To REVISE some writing

- After you've submitted your writing you may revise it by first visiting the "Anthology (A Collection of Writing)" available for each lesson. Go first to the [Lesson Index](#) and then click on the "Lesson" you wish to view.
- There are links to the Anthology for drafts, revisions, and final copies.
- When you arrive at the Anthology, click on your browser's "Refresh/Reload."
- Display the piece to be revised, highlight all of it, and copy it to your computer's memory (Edit Menu > Copy).
- Open your word processor, create a new document, and paste your original from memory into the word processor (Edit Menu > Paste).
- Make your revisions, save your revision (with another name), and copy your revised piece to the computer's memory (Edit > Copy).
- Return to your assignment's Lesson Index, navigate to the "Revision" link, and paste your revision into the text frame (like you did for the draft).
- Be sure to include your ID and a "revised" title (e.g. *welcome2*).



submission to the teacher. (*Editor's note:* For the SOWS and other URLs, see Resources on p. 27.)

The SOWS project demonstrates how Internet-mediated databases, such as FileMaker, make the writing process more assessable, efficient, and compelling. (*Editor's note:* For more on the technical aspects of the SOWS project, see the supplement at <http://www.iste.org/LL/>.) What's more, it models how technology can affect student motivation to write, provide students with a forum for communicating with peers about their writing, and reduce hours of out-of-class reading by the teacher. Student authors have marveled at the opportunity for grandparents to read (and respond to) their writing from out of state. One student said, "I really liked how we had friends and teachers respond to [our] writing because it helped to learn their points of view and what they thought about the piece."

Setting Up a Write Site

Customized Write Sites provide teachers and students easy access to their writing from anywhere—through the Internet. Student writing is conveniently stored on and accessed from a FileMaker database located on the ESD's Web server. Teachers collaborate with me, the School Improvement Program's Web developer, to create their personalized Write Site by modifying an existing template to reflect that teacher's instructional focus. I then maintain the teacher's site for the remainder of the school year. I am also happy to consult by e-mail with teachers outside my area who desire to create a Write Site on their server. (If you are interested in hosting a Write Site on your own server, all Web pages used in the SOWS project are freely available for

download so you can customize the source code to meet your needs.)

In addition to housing teachers' individualized Write Site pages, the Write Site also offers a wide variety of resources and training materials, including links to articles and writing resources. To learn what goes on in the background of the project, see the online supplement, *So How Does It Work?*, or visit the practice pages on the Write Site. (Some school networks are protected by firewalls that may block the port 591 URL and require network administrators to provide you access to that port. You should be able to access the site from home. Once you're in, I suggest clicking on Project One, Freewriting, to get a feel for it.)

Using a Write Site

Once the initial site is created, teachers e-mail me with something like, "We have started a poetry unit," or, "I would like a page for imaginative writing set up for my site." I then edit the necessary pages on the teacher's Write Site. Included in teachers' e-mail messages to me are copies of the assignment and the lesson's scoring criteria that are linked from the teacher's Write Site Project Index. Adding a project takes me approximately 10 minutes using Macromedia's DreamWeaver software to find, replace, and edit text and code.

Certain minimum conditions have repeatedly resulted in success: good student keyboarding skills, three or more networked computers in the classroom, and access to a networked computer lab or a set of portable laptops. (AlphaSmarts also work well.) Most important, however, is the willingness of the participating teachers to take the mandatory risks associated with relinquishing instructional

power and tapping into the emerging communication and technological abilities of their students.

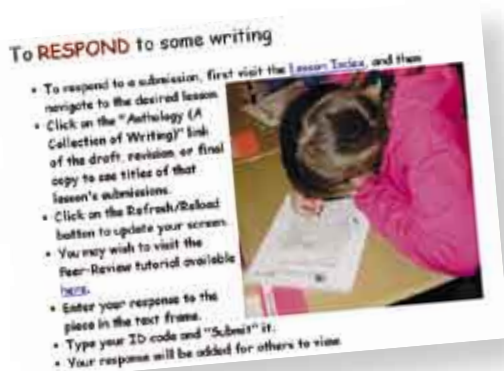
When students post their writing, the title is added to a sortable compilation of other titles for that specific lesson (be it a draft, revision, or final copy). Some teachers request that authors' remain anonymous and are easily accommodated. This sort of customizing is hammered out during the planning sessions with the teacher.

Clicking on a title calls up another screen that displays the writing and presents potential responders with a text frame for their feedback. Another display option is the "Response Forum" that lists all writing that has feedback. Clicking on a title calls up a screen that not only displays the original piece but all responses to the piece, suitable for printing to facilitate revision offline.

Generating Online Reports

FileMaker's "lookup" feature provides users with numerous options for generating reports. Enter a student ID, a title, or lesson status (e.g., "final") in a simple Web interface and all found records are displayed in specially designed layouts, including:

Self-Reflection. Results of a Self-Reflection search display the selected writing (e.g., a student's final copy) accompanied by a text frame for the authors to reflect on their own writing. Focused questions guide the authors to relate how they felt about the piece, parts they struggled with, what they did to improve the piece from the first draft to the final copy, and what they might have done given more time. After submitting the reflection piece, the information is displayed when a digital portfolio is requested.



Writing Assessment. This recent modification was requested by a teacher who wanted students not only to reflect on the process by which they addressed the piece, but wanted both the author and classmates to provide authors with feedback based on Oregon scoring criteria. This is an excellent practice activity, and the information appears when generating a digital portfolio.

Digital Portfolio/Writing Sample.

Unlike the previous reports, this search results in a display of all “found” records without any text frame for reflection or assessment. The results could display all of a student’s work for any given assignment (draft, revision, final copy, the reflection piece, and writing assessment), all final copies submitted by a student during a grading period (which comes in handy at parent conference time), or a class anthology of all final copies of every assignment in a class. Digital portfolios/writing samples are displayed one after another, suitable for printing, invaluable during conferencing, and perfect for archiving.

Adapting a Write Site

The Southern Oregon Write Site integrates seamlessly into many types of writing assignments, including:

- Annotated problem solving
- Journaling
- Inquiry-based science projects
- Responses to assigned reading
- Foreign language

- Current events discussions, reporting, and opinions

French, Italian, and Spanish sites are already in use, and may be adapted for foreign language, bilingual, and ESL and ELL classes. When desired by a teacher, lesson-specific prompts, and/or scoring guides are easily added to a submission screen for reinforcement.

It is during the preliminary planning sessions where the “look” of the teacher’s site is discussed. A Write Site could feature a school logo or a graphic representing the class or community. The Web page merely serves as a holder, or frame, for retrieved text stored and sorted on a remote database. Because student contributions may be written in other languages, a teacher’s Write Site may be customized in other languages. (Cyrillic and other non-Roman alphabets would be harder.) A local dual-language classroom requested a Write Site with both a Spanish and English version. The students write, post, respond, and revise writing in Spanish, and because the database doesn’t know what language is used in a text field, both languages are easily accommodated.

Building on Student Strengths

Many students familiar with the Internet perceive posting to the Southern Oregon Write Site as another form of chat, instant messaging, or e-mail. They provide little (if any) meaningful feedback with suggestions for revision, and responses to classmates tend to be in sentence fragments, socially flavored, and often in code. When demonstrating the features of the Write Site’s “Discussion Forum” component, I teach a mini-lesson using the responding framework, “I noticed, I wondered, What if.” This serves two purposes: students learn meaningful, respectful feedback skills and learn how to

navigate through the Write Site (both paramount to the six-session training that comes later). This “pretraining” session may be taught in the classroom using overheads (available on the SOWS workshop materials Web page), and is also a great time to discuss basic computer skills needed to maximize precious time in heavily scheduled computer labs.

After introducing a response structure into the writing process, a perceptible change occurs. Peer response is fundamental to this project and providing this forum serves a variety of functions that allow students to:

- Receive more feedback from their classmates than their teacher would be able to give them as a single reader.
- Contribute and receive a different kind of feedback to and from their classmates than they get from their teacher. Students “hear” feedback laterally from peers (rather than top-down from teacher).
- Practice reading and writing critically when they read and respond to their classmates’ writing.
- Help other authors with their writing, which helps students internalize reflective habits of mind.

Coupled with a clear understanding of the lesson’s scoring guide or rubric, students are more inclined to embellish their spontaneous (and generally positive) feedback with thoughtful and genuinely helpful comments to their classmates. Meaningful reactions from their primary reading audience (their peers) reinforce the lesson’s criteria and help authors revise with confidence.

I’ve noticed that children around middle school age tend to be especially comfortable with responding activities, particularly when they are motivated by a participation contract that clearly defines their responsibility to the group. Younger authors, although capable of learning and

performing the tasks related to technology, tend to be less interested in the social interaction employed in this project and require substantially more training to become meaningful responders.

Training Strategies

I teach a series of six sequential skill lessons when introducing the computer-supported writing process to teachers and their students. Prior to visiting their classroom, teachers and I review the content I use in the easily modified lessons. The activities are closely aligned with the process approach to writing as embraced by the National Writing Project—activities that nurtures freedom within a structure. The six training sessions are:

1. Prewriting and Drafting (Classroom Activity)
2. Text Entry: The Draft (Lab Activity)
3. Read Around & Small Group Response Activity (Classroom Activity)
4. Text Entry & Online Responding: The Revision (Lab Activity)
5. Conventions/Editing Activity (Classroom Activity)
6. Text Entry: Final Copy (Lab Activity).

Each lesson introduces a sequential skill in the writing process and lasts approximately 45–50 minutes. In some instances, two lessons are presented back to back, separated by a break, which works well when a classroom activity precedes a computer activity or to break up a particularly intensive session (e.g., session three). In some cases, the teacher will schedule a day or two between my visits to give students more time to practice learned skills.

Fundamental to the training sessions is the availability of networked computers. Computer labs are handy when dealing with an entire class, although any cluster of computers with

access to the Internet will do. Students may also work in pairs or small groups while others work independently elsewhere. It merits pointing out that only three of the six sessions are computer-dependent, freeing the lab for other purposes.

The workshop agenda and a collection of all materials supporting the six sessions are available on the SOWS home page. Feel free to use any of these materials, and kindly inform me of modifications, comments, and suggestions that might benefit other teachers. My e-mail address is posted at the bottom of all Write Site pages.

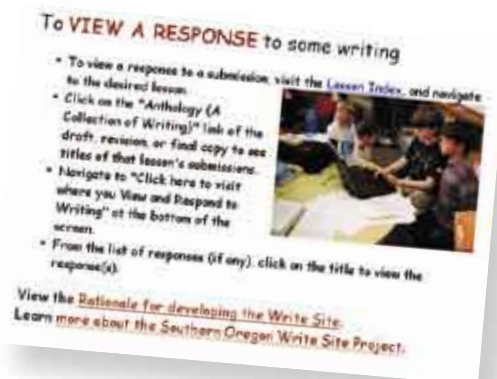
Managing the Activities

Anyone familiar with teaching and computers knows how important it is for students to save their work—often. Where students save is another matter. Without a computer network, it's imperative that students be assigned to specific machines or at least carry floppy disks (remember them?) whenever they're asked to work with a previously saved file.

Fortunately, most schools in our area are networked, so saving work to network directories and backing up on a networked database eliminates the need to have students assigned to a particular workstation. No longer is a student unable to work if a particular workstation is out of order. Nor is it a concern if the student forgets (or loses, destroys, or repurposes) the disk with all-important data on it. Publishing on the Internet (i.e., onto a networked database) makes the data available for retrieval and editing from any workstation with Internet access—at school, at home, or (as in my case last summer) in Italy. And with networks regularly backed up, there's little chance that student writing will be lost.

Reflecting on the Write Site

Bear in mind that to make something like this work in your class-



room requires a willingness to take some risks. But you'll soon discover that these management skills are nothing teachers haven't been doing forever—except that on the Southern Oregon Write Site they're intertwined with technology.

There's a significant correlation between successful Web-based instruction and a commitment to other methods of online communication (e.g., personal Web pages, online homework assignments, class announcements and calendars, and publishing your e-mail address so students and/or parents may communicate with you privately). This should not be a surprise, however, because communication is what this project is all about. Join us.

Resources

Northwest Council for Computer Education:
<http://www.ncce.org>
 Oregon Council of Teachers of English:
<http://www.octe.org>
 Southern Oregon ESD Instructional Technology Dept.: <http://www.soesd.k12.or.us/it/sows/>
 SOWS Home Page: <http://www.soesd.k12.or.us/it/sows/>
 SOWS Practice Pages: <http://www.soesd.k12.or.us/it/cpost/sows/esdws/>



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Teachers of English. Nick has presented at several conferences including the Northwest Council for Computer Education and the National Council of Teachers of English.

So How Does It Work?

The backbone of the Write Site is a FileMaker database housed on a Web server at the Southern Oregon ESD in Medford. The Southern Oregon Write Site (SOWS) relies on browser-based editing to feed its database. SOWS provides users a choice of four languages: English, Spanish, Italian, and French. Although the agency uses FileMaker to accomplish many database functions, the Write Site uses only a small piece of the action because text files are relatively small. Last year, for example, only 5,000 records were submitted. Regardless of size, however, there's a lot of student writing, revising, and responding stored in those records.

The Write Site database is not terribly sophisticated: it consists of only 14 fields. The most important are name, title, text, status, course, lesson, and date. In addition, it includes four additional fields for responses and the responders' names. What distinguishes one teacher from another is the code assigned in the "course" field, and that makes customizing a Write Site simple. I keep a generic Write Site called "clone" on my computer. This folder is constantly updated with new adaptations of the Write Site by teachers. View it at <http://www.soesd.k12.or.us:591/it/cpost/sows/clone/>. Because the FileMaker database is accessed through the server's port 591, some districts with firewalls need to have their network administrators "open" that port.

As new classrooms join the Write Site project, I duplicate "clone" and use Macromedia DreamWeaver to find and replace a few things. The new folder is identified with the code of the new participant: the teacher's initials plus "ws." Mine is "nvws." Every page in the "clone" directory has an identifying heading of "Username's Write Site" which must be customized in the new folder. I find and replace every occurrence of the text "username" and replace it with the teacher or project's name. That takes about a minute. The other change made to the new folder is "source code" (HTML), and I replace the "lesson" for clone with the code for the teacher. That takes another minute. This newly cloned folder is then put on the server and that's it. DreamWeaver has FTP (File Transfer Protocol) built in which makes updating the server a breeze. And because both DreamWeaver and FileMaker are networked, I'm able to connect my laptop to a school's network and make modifications in the field.

The support page of the Southern Oregon Write Site is linked from our Instructional Technology program's Web site located at <http://www.soesd.k12.or.us/it/> (under Online Learning). I invite you to snoop around. The purposes of the Southern Oregon Write Site home page are to:

- Feature a variety of instructional strategies and teaching styles that use the Web to support writing in the content areas
- House instructional materials used to introduce the Write Site in classrooms
- Compile key language arts resources for easy access
- Archive relevant articles on teaching literacy with technology

All Web pages used in the SOWS project are freely available for downloading so you can customize the source code to meet your needs. Local teachers' Write Sites are created and maintained for Oregon teachers at no cost.

Write Sites are not password-protected, privacy concerns dictate that we not link to teachers' customized sites from a main page. Teachers wishing to change a lesson send me the information in an e-mail message, and I update their site. What this usually consists of is a brief summary of the assignment (always available online for students and parents), the assignment and scoring criteria, rubrics or guidelines, and the project title. Because few teachers want all 12 projects initially displayed on their Write Site, all but a few are hidden from the teacher's Write Site Project Index (but always available when needed). It doesn't take long to create a customized Write Site, and



all I ask of teachers is to submit their requests a week in advance.

It is our desire to make the Southern Oregon Write Site available to any district wishing to host it. Its current dependency on FileMaker Pro will diminish in time, perhaps switching to one of the more powerful Web-based databases. The advantages would be to permit local teacher-level editing, both of content and of appearance, password protection, and local administration. The current lack of password protection has not been a problem, although at the request of some districts we'll implement passwords and teacher access to the database soon.

The Southern Oregon Write Site is a work in progress and well into its fifth year. Although it may not accommodate every teacher's curriculum or teaching style, there have been so many adaptations of the initial project that it's only going to get better. Online support of writing will become more viable as additional coursework goes online. This project was originally intended to reduce a classroom teacher's responsibility to read and respond to *every* piece of writing by having students responding to classmates' drafts and revisions prior to submitting it to the teacher. What has resulted is an incredible shift in how many are viewing the use of the Internet in their instruction.

